

QUESTIONS FROM MALAYSIA

(to Khang)

April 1978

Question about Kamma: Is it due to environment or hereditary causes that one is born into various conditions.

Answer In conventional language and in science we use the word hereditary a lot. However, in order to know the truth we have to consider: what are the realities -- the nāmas and rūpas -- and how are they conditioned. We have to consider conditions, and there are many different ones. The human mind, what is it? Only different nāmas and different rūpas which are conditioned by different kinds of conditions, working at different moments of our life. As to the first moment of life: nāma and rūpa are produced by kamma. This is one of the conditions. But first I should explain a little more about kamma, which was one of your other questions.

Kamma This is another word for volition, which is a mental factor (cetasika) arising with each citta. There are many kinds of volitions, depending on the citta it accompanies. When the citta is kusala citta, the volition or kamma is kusala and it can motivate good deeds. When the citta is akusala, the volition is also akusala, and it can motivate ill deeds. There is also volition with the citta which are neither kusala or akusala, with the vipākicittas and kiri-yacittas, but in those cases cetanā, or kamma, has merely the task of coordinating the work of the other cetasikas which accompany a citta. When you want to explain kamma in simple terms, as you told me, you need not mention this.)

As you know, citta arises from moment to moment, they arise and fall away. Now the citta is kusala, then it is akusala. At the moment you are angry and hit someone there is akusala volition which motivates the hitting. At such a moment you (but not really you, citta) forgot about kusala, and how different are the moments of kusala and akusala. At the moment you give, cetanā is kusala, quite different. Now then could one take volition for self, a person who directs? Nobody directing, only different moments of citta, arising because of different conditions.

Where do such ugly things -- akusala cittas come from? Where do kusala cittas come from? When you are used to hitting other people you will see how this inclination comes up again. You have accumulated such a tendency. The way you were in the past conditions how you are now. Each citta arises and falls away completely, but it conditions the next citta and in turn the next. Thus it is possible that each citta carries in itself the potential for good and bad deeds. We call this a person's character, but this is only a conventional term. Character, hereditary causes, these terms are not clear, we should look at the real causes of phenomena.

Kamma can produce different results, in the form of rebirth (happy rebirth, unhappy rebirth) and also in the course of life: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, receiving bodily impressions, these are vipākacittas, cittas which are result of kamma. When a tree hits you, the tree is not the result of kamma, but the bodily pain, the citta which experiences that object is the result of kamma. A tree may fall onto two people, one may not have any bodily pain, the other may be hurt. Different kammās produce different vipākas. The thinking with aversion about what you experience is not vipāka, it is akusala citta, another moment again. But we confuse the different moments. When the doctor pricks you the aversion seems to be at the same time as the vipākacitta which experiences the hardness or heat, but they are all different cittas at different moments.

As to the environment into which one is born, that is not mere chance. It fits your kamma. The same is true about the parents, the family. It fits one's kamma, kamma takes care of it so that birth takes place in such and such country, into such and such family. Nothing is by accident, everything which happens has conditions.

If you want to explain kamma and vipāka in very simple terms, you could say that the good deeds and the bad deeds you do bring good and bad results, they come (so to say) back to you in the form of results, sooner or later, somehow or other.

Question Someone had an accident and his brain is damaged. Is that kamma, can it be cured?

Answer The citta which experiences the unpleasant object is the result of akusala kamma, but we do not know whether it is a kamma of a former life or of this life. Different kammās find their opportunities to produce different results at different moments of our lives. Brain is rūpa, it is composed of solidity, cohesion, motion, temperature and other rūpas. Brain does not think, brain does not know anything. However, rūpas condition nāmas. It is nāma which experiences, thinks, feels. When someone is what we call mad, there is still citta, so long as there is life. Citta and cetasikas. The family could even help such a person to do good deeds, but of course the conditions are not such that wisdom can be developed. But even when we are sane, consider how few moments of kusala and how many moments of akusala. And is there the development of satipaṭṭhāna? So, whether someone is sane or not sane is a notion used in conventional language. We are all in a way not quite sane so long as we have not attained enlightenment.

Question How to explain in a simple way to others about rebirth. Is there an intermediary state before one is reborn?

Answer There is today, and we know there was yesterday, then

why doubt that there will be tomorrow?

Now more in detail: you do not doubt there is citta at this moment, be it citta which sees, or citta which hears or citta which thinks. The citta now has been conditioned by a previous citta, and this again by a previous one, and so on, back until the first citta of this life. Also this first one must have been conditioned, by a previous one. It succeeded the last citta of the ~~past~~ life. The present life followed upon the past life. In the same ^{way} the next life follows upon this life. The last citta of this life will be succeeded by another citta, which is the first citta of the next life. So long as there are conditions for life, that is, so long as we did not attain arahatship we will not be freed from the cycle of birth and death. Just as life goes on now from moment to moment, so it will go on in the future.

In which plane we will be reborn depends on the kamma which produces the next rebirth-consciousness. The rebirth-consciousness, the first citta of life, is vipākacitta.

About the intermediary stage: from the foregoing it follows that there is no intermediary stage, citta succeeds citta, life succeeds life, no interruptions. It is possible that after this life there is rebirth in another plane and that life is very short to be followed by another life in this plane, but who knows?

Question What is dreaming? Then we re-asleep are we in bhavanga-state?

Answer Not only when asleep there are bhavanga-cittas. ('state' is a word which is too static) There is seeing now, and then hearing and these experiences are not mixed, they are definitely different experiences, we can recognize them as such. The cittas arising in the process of cittas experiencing visible object are separated from the cittas arising in the process experiencing sound by bhavanga-citta. These cittas do not have objects such as visible object or sound which impinge on one of the six doors again and again. Bhavanga-citta is the same type of citta as the rebirth-consciousness, it is vipāka produced by kamma. All the time throughout life they arise in between processes, they keep (so to say) continuity in our life, which consists of cittas arising and falling away. When we are asleep there must be citta. When we are dreaming we are mostly akusala cittas, sometimes kusala cittas. Cittas arising from objects through the mind-door, there are also bhavanga-cittas. When we are not dreaming and in deep sleep, there are bhavanga-cittas, they experience the same object as the first citta of the life, and this is the same object as experienced by the citta arising immediately before dying in the past life. We do not know what the object is, (but I would not say it is impossible to know, that is for those who have developed wisdom.) We cannot speculate about that. But since we

are born humans it has to be a pleasant object.

Why do we have to dream? It has to do with the bodily tiredness which induces sleep and very much with all our akusala inclinations, our worries, since we often dream about what we thought over during the day. It is very helpful to be mindful of nāma and rūpa before going to sleep.

Question The Buddha walked seven steps after his birth, and then you speak about other events of seven days. Then you add that the Buddha did not explain things which were not conducive to spiritual training. ~~A Yes, that is the answer. No use to speculate about it, it does not help us to know nāma and rūpa as they are.~~

Question In order to attain enlightenment one must practice vipassanā. Can one do sitting meditation, or awareness of the rise and fall of the abdomen? Or walking meditation? Or awareness of the movement of the footsole? Or just follow what you said in 'Buddhism in Daily Life'?

Answer You certainly should not follow anybody, people say many different things. But consider and check. Does it help you to know better the nāma and rūpa which appears now, be it seeing, hearing, touching or hardness, or heat?

When you sit, is there seeing? When you walk is there seeing? There is seeing in our daily life. There is hearing, there is hardness, there are all the different nāmas and rūpas appearing. There can be mindfulness of them if there is right understanding of them. It is listening and considering of what you heard about nāma and rūpa which can condition a kusala citta with awareness. We cannot have many kusala cittas, and so we cannot have many moments of awareness, it is not self. It is a sobhana cetāsika, and how could there be a self which orders awareness to come and perform its function? Sitting cannot induce it, walking cannot induce it, following the abdomen cannot induce it. Such actions which aim at inducing sati are motivated by desire for a lot of sati, they are akusala cittas. Since desire can be so subtle, and the accompanying feeling is pleasant or indifferent, it can be desire in disguise. It can seem calmness, but it is desire. That is why all such practices are so very dangerous. The more natural you are, the better for the right kind of sati.

You may know how few moments there is kusala citta in a day. You cannot force kusala, it is anatta, not self. You know also that studying Dhamma is a good condition for kusala, but even study of Dhamma is conditioned, maybe you studied in the past. Each kusala citta is accompanied by sati. There are many different kinds of sati. Sati remembers what is kusala. When you give, there is sati ^{which} remembers to give. When you abstain from lying there is sati

which remembers to abstain, it is sati of sīla. There is sati of samatha, tranquil meditation, it remembers the meditation object. There is sati in vipassanā which is mindful of any nāma or rūpa appearing right now. This kind of sati has an object which is different from the other kinds of sati, sati of cāra, sati of sīla, sati of samatha, and it performs a different function. Still, we cannot choose what kusala to perform at which moment, it depends on conditions. All sorts of kusala are valuable, let us not despise any kind.

As regards samatha, this is why to have kusala citta instead of akusala citta, it is wholesome. When you are very angry the whole day, you may see the value of kusala and the disadvantage of akusala. You may suddenly see the other person you are angry with as a human being, towards whom you should have mettā. Mettā is very valuable, we should cultivate it in daily life. Maybe you have read about mettā and suddenly sati remembers. It helped me a lot that we discussed mettā so often in Sri Lanka. Or compassion. The one who treats you badly deserves compassion, he is really the loser, he makes himself unhappy.

The Buddha showed many meditation subjects and they are worked out in the commentary (Visuddhimagga): 40 in all. They are so very well balanced, they really work; they are conditions for kusala, if practised in the right way. One of them is mindfulness of breath (at the tip of the nose) and this is one of the most difficult ones. If we change it around to make it easier we overshoot our target. What is the aim of this subject? To have full concentration instead of attachment to our life, to our body and to our breath. One learns that our life to which we cling so much is dependant on this tiny rūpa which is at the tip of the nose. If we say, 'Oh well, this is too difficult, let us change and follow the abdomen,' we have a lot of material to cling to; not exciting, the movement up and down of the abdomen and we think of the whole body, make it so important. It cannot work, it is not the place of samatha, it induces attachment. It is difficult, and it is difficult (not to be discouraged), do not take another subject such as the abdomen, because you will not have a right understanding of the meditation subject. For the development of mettā you have a different attachment, different from attachment to the people. Attachment can arise closely one after another. Now the difference. Samatha is not trying to concentrate (which arises with every citta anyway) will go together with the paññā of samatha, but it all depends how much accumulations one has for samatha. For laypeople there can be some moments of samatha in their daily life now and then.

Vipassanā is quite different. What has to be known in vipassanā? Any reality which appears through one of the six doors, now. One nāma or rūpa at a time. While you are sitting, is there no hardness appearing? There are moments that you think of the body or your leg which feels hard. But there may also be a moment that there is only hardness, nothing else. At that moment there is no mixing the hardness with the concept of body, it is just the element of hardness, only a kind of rūpa presenting itself through the body-sense. This is the way to 'study' realities with awareness. Not study from books, but study as you experience different nāmas and rūpas one at a time. Person, body, dog, tree, are not realities, because what is really there? What is really there when we see a person? You cannot see a person, only the visible object is seen through the eyes. Thinking of the person: thinking is real, it is a kind of nāma. Person is not real, it is a concept or idea. Body is not real, it is a concept or idea. The body consists of many different kinds of rūpa which arise and fall away. When you touch a body, hardness may appear through the body-sense, or softness, heat or cold. These are rūpas which can be studied, not through thinking, but when they appear. This is the way to develop satipaṭṭhāna, quite naturally, in daily life. No sitting or any special preparation is necessary.

We have lots of misunderstandings about nāma and rūpa. Take visible object. We think we see a tree, but that is not so. Tree does not impinge on the eye-sense. When we pay attention to shape and form it is not seeing. We have to become more and more precise. When we close our eyes, no seeing. When we open them there is a reality which experiences something through the eyes, it is the citta which sees. First we know this through thinking, but when there is study in the right way, with sati, we will learn characteristics of nāma and rūpa more precisely. We cannot hear a dog. Only sound appears through the ears, no dog. Dog is a concept we think of. Thinking is real, the dog is not real. The Abhidhamma helps us with right understanding as a foundation for vipassanā.

You may wonder: in the suttas we read about monks who were sitting under the trees and developing jhāna. Khun Sujin (she is my good friend in the Dhamma, in Bangkok) had a short answer: 'They were sitting there already'. In other words, for those monks it was natural to be there and they had already practised jhāna. The Buddha explained to them how any reality can be object of mindfulness, even the jhānacitta. And they could be aware of it since they had no intention with desire to attain jhāna, they did what was natural for them. So, this does not mean that all of us, including laypeople must sit in seclusion and develop jhāna first. Everything that is natural for us, that we must do, if we do not lead our daily life there is self (an idea of self) who is trying.

This is no way to develop paññā.

And if you wonder: my paññā is so weak, what should I do? The answer is: all kinds of kusala, any kind for which there is an opportunity. Khun Sujin praised giving very much. She said, 'If we give, it helps us to cling less to our property and if one clings so much to one's possessions it is even harder to eradicate the attachment to self'.

When we read suttas, we can say that every sutta is a reminder for sati, even if it is not explicitly mentioned. Satipaṭṭhāna is the Buddha's teaching, and if we remember that the development of wisdom is the goal, even when not mentioned, all the sutta words can be such a very effective reminder for us. Giving is praised, why? If we accumulate giving it will help us to cling less and when paññā has been developed, it is paññā which can perform the function of detachment from self. When the Bodhisatta accumulated the perfections in dāna, sīla and bhāvanā, he always had in mind the highest goal which he would attain eventually.

The sotāpanna has eradicated all stinginess, he is truly a 'believer', that is, someone with saddha, with unshakable confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. This is in the following sutta, Gradual Sayings, Book of the Threes, Ch. V, par. 42, Characteristics:

Monks, a believer is to be recognized by three characteristics. What three?

He desires to see the virtuous; he desires to hear saddhamma¹⁾; with heart free from the taint of stinginess, he dwells at home, a generous giver, clean handed, delighting in giving up, one to ask a favour of, one who delights to share gifts with others. By these three characteristics a believer is to be recognized as such....

1) 'Saddhamma' means "the true Dhamma."